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Behind the Voice that Brought Peace: The Emperor as Hero in *The Emperor in August* (Harada Masato, 2015)

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### *Introduction*

The Second World War seems to never end. A lifetime after Japan's defeat on 15 August 1945 films, television dramas and documentaries about the war are still widely produced. The memory of the Pacific War is kept alive in the media, while increasingly fewer members of the Japanese audience have direct recollections of the events, allowing the media to step into a void, filling it with heroic stories of soldiers fighting for a lost cause and innocent civilians dying from indiscriminate Allied bombing. Yet memory can play tricks on us – or, in the case of memory created by the media, we can be misled – few 'historical films' would pass the litmus test when assessed for accuracy. Facts are sacrificed in order to create gripping storylines with the aim of making us 'feel the past' (Creeber 2004). Moreover we do not just relive positive memories, we can also share the trauma of our ancestors and make it part of our culture, or, in Jeffrey Alexander's words: "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (2004: 1).

Suffering two nuclear attacks and being defeated arguably constitutes such cultural trauma and it is thus no surprise that all three events loom large in the Japanese collective memory. However, as 'history' it is highly selective and, as I have argued elsewhere (Kirsch 2019), what is remembered and what is forgotten, becomes crucial and can change along with the concurrent politics of memory. One constant in Japan's shifting memory politics is the 'The Imperial Rescript on Surrender' (*gyokuon hōsō*, lit. Jewel voice broadcast), the declaration of surrender read out by Emperor Hirohito (Shōwa Tennō) to the Japanese on August 15, 1945, which features in almost every film and television drama set in the war, signaling to the characters on the screen, and the audiences in front of it, that the war is finally over. The phrase "enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable" (*tae kataki wo tae*,

*shinobi kataki wo shinobi*) (The Imperial Household Agency, n.d.) has become both part of the cultural trauma of defeat and has entered the Japanese collective memory.

Despite the omnipresence of the *gyokuon hōsō*, and thus his voice, the Emperor as a person is nonetheless conspicuous by his absence on big, as well as small, screens. As the national ideology of the time ‘imagined’ (q.v. Anderson 1991) Japan and its Empire as forming a quasi-familial state, the Emperor was the symbolical figurehead that functioned as the head of this ‘family’. Soldiers swore loyalty to the Emperor and they died for him (Beasley 1990). At that time, the Emperor, as an institution within the Japanese Constitution, would have been part of the lives of his subjects and soldiers – the Imperial Crest, a chrysanthemum, was after all on each Imperial warship and every order was issued in the Emperor’s name. Yet when it came to the reckoning at the war’s end, Emperor Hirohito was not tried as a war criminal at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East and his constitutional role was reinvented as that of a symbol of the state in the constitution of 1947. He remained emperor of Japan until his death in January 1989.

Perhaps Hirohito’s longevity and continuing presence in Japan throughout much of the post-war period is one of the reasons why he does not feature much on screen, as representing him somehow would have necessitated asking whether his responsibility for the war was much greater than that of simply recording the *gyokuon hōsō*. Therefore, he remains associated with having ended the war rather than with having begun it. He remains invisible in the media, his statement has become iconic and synonymous with the conflict’s end. Moreover, in war films the storylines always focus on his subjects, ordinary Japanese citizens and soldiers for whom the *gyokuon hōsō* provides relief.<sup>1</sup>

So far the only film to deliberately break away from the trope of Hirohito as a disembodied voice is Harada Masato’s 2015 film *Nihon no ichiban nagai hi* (Japan’s Longest Day, a.k.a. *The Emperor in August*), which itself is based on a book by Handō Kazutoshi (1965) and is a remake of the 1967 film *Nihon no ichiban nagai hi* by Okamoto Kihachi. Given Harada’s propensity for focusing on the human factor in history,<sup>2</sup> *The Emperor in August* narrates how

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<sup>1</sup> To some extent this is also true for Hollywood productions about the Second World War. *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (dir. Richard Fleischer, Fukasaku Kinji and Masuda Toshio, 1970) as well as *Midway* (dir. Jack Smight, 1976), for example, make mention of the Emperor and his interest in the war – without showing him.

<sup>2</sup> We can see this tendency in his *Climbers High* (2008), a film about local journalists covering the JL123 crash (Hood 2011), and, more recently, *Sekigahara* (2017) about the political machinations preceding the eponymous battle that unified Japan in the seventeenth century.

the all-familiar and ubiquitous *gyokuon hōsō* came into being, including a plot to prevent it from being broadcast and the determination to let Japan self-destruct instead.

A *Kinema Junpō* special issue on war films, published to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conflict's end, asks "*eiga de naniga dekiru no ka?*" (What can be done in a film?) but no answer can be found inside the magazine (*Kinema Junpō zōkan 2015*: title page). Therefore, this chapter will consider the question of what are the limitations for film: what can, or cannot, be done when it comes to the memory of the Second World War. The first film featuring the Shōwa Tennō in a major role presents a perfect opportunity to try and answer this query.

First, to highlight if, and how, *The Emperor in August* differs from other war films (and, to some extent, television drama), I will outline some twenty-first century developments in this genre, aiming to work out how the collective memory of the war in Japan continues to be forged, and how the resulting narratives affect each other. Afterwards I will provide some background on war memory in Japan during the summer of 2015, in order to underscore the political atmosphere at that time. Then, *The Emperor in August* will be discussed, particularly referencing to the role of Emperor Hirohito, as his potential involvement in the war has sparked so much controversy in the post-war period. I will consider the question that *Kinema Junpō* posed, while reflecting on whether the film cements or subverts the prevalent collective memory about the end of the war, and to what extent *The Emperor in August* differs from other films. To answer this, the emperor's constitutional role and Hirohito's possible involvement in the war first need to be considered.

#### *War criminal or powerless puppet?*

Whether or not Emperor Hirohito should have been tried as war criminal remains among the most contested issues surrounding the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. Loyalists and royalists usually come to his defense, arguing that, historically, Japan never had had powerful emperors. It was always the institution, rather than the incumbents, that had been used as a front while others (the shogunate, politicians, the military) ran the government (e.g. Auer 2006). On the opposing side are two American historians, John Dower (1999) and Herbert Bix (2001) who, in their Pulitzer Prize winning books, argue that Hirohito knew everything about the war and the conduct of the military, having intervened, or chosen not to intervene, in the decision-making processes countless times. Their view implicates him in all of Japan's war crimes – and, by extension, contends that he should have stood trial. The issue is thus

immensely complex and apparently without solution. His son, Akihito, styled himself the 'People's Emperor' (Ruoff 2001) and worked to become more popular among the Japanese than his father. The fact that Akihito had been a child during the war also enabled him to breathe fresh air into the monarchy, and, most importantly, air that had not been polluted by any possible involvement in the war.

As Japan has been a constitutional monarchy since the Meiji era (1868-1912), the Emperor's role and functions have been legally prescribed – irrespective of actual practice. It is helpful to look at the Meiji Constitution of 1889 to find out what an emperor could (or should) have done and where the boundaries of his power were. As the constitution was written in a time in which some European countries, most notably Germany and Russia, still had strong monarchs, the role of the Japanese Emperor was modelled along similar lines (Beasley 1991). In the attempt to restore imperial power, the constitution turned the Emperor into the nation's sovereign, also making him supreme commander of the Armed Forces. *De jure* the ultimate decision-making power would have been Hirohito's, although he was advised by the Privy Council. Consequently, he should have at least been informed of all events, and, nominally, he should have had to approve them. Whether, as Auer (2006) argues, decisions had been taken away from him by lower ranking officers (just as they took them away from Army Headquarters), or, as Bix and Dower argue, he was actively involved in the processes (some manipulation of his power notwithstanding), Hirohito remains the person on whom the entire system centered. This is also testament to the somewhat murky reality of the imperial system at the time.

The fact that the Emperor was not tried as a war criminal by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, Douglas MacArthur, splits Japan neatly along the lines of 'progressives' (who acknowledge Japan's, and his, responsibility) and 'conservatives' (who renounce both while seeing the war as an act of self-defense and thereby justified).<sup>3</sup> This split runs through the nation and is testament to how Japan's war memories seem to have no common ground on which the majority of the population can agree. It also provides another possible reason to

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<sup>3</sup> This question is also picked up in the international co-production *Tōkyō Saiban* (Tokyo Trial). The four-part mini-series was produced under the leadership of NHK and aired in Japan in December 2016. It has been distributed internationally on Netflix. When, in episode 3 Tōjō Hideki (Prime Minister at the time of Pearl Harbour) is shown as standing trial, he seems to implicate the Emperor. Asked whether he knew of an instance in which the Emperor's wish for peace had not been respected, he responds saying that no imperial subject would go against the wishes of the Emperor, thereby implicitly negating an imperial wish for peace. When he is called upon again, he has revised his statement, exonerating Hirohito.

why Hirohito might never have been shown on screen, while at the same time his voice has been omnipresent. Given that war memory in Japan is so contested, only the lowest common denominator versions can be safely shown without too much controversy: the nuclear attacks and, by extension, the unconditional surrender (with the *gyokuon hōsō* instrumental in this). These very real events thus comprise the cultural trauma of defeat and the *gyokuon hōsō* has become inextricably linked with this anguish. Given the vast discrepancies in opinion about the Emperor's involvement and role during the war it seems impossible to construct a shared narrative; he appears too contentious to have been portrayed in a major screen role throughout most of the post-war period, which has been an era of economic boom and bust.

Right-wing nationalism has been on the rise in Japan since the burst of the economic bubble in the 1990s. Now, several years after the historical revisionist Abe Shinzō became Prime Minister of Japan in 2012, the Second World War has become an increasingly controversial issue, which has contributed to it having considerably less airtime in the mass media. In 2015 when *The Emperor in August* hit the screens in Japan, marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war's end, few television dramas and only a handful of films depicting the war were broadcast. In contrast, ten years previously a plethora of television dramas, films and documentaries were produced (Seaton 2007, Kirsch 2012). All these films serve as backdrop against which *The Emperor in August* must be read.

### *Contemporary War Films in Japan: Progressive or Conservative?*

The 60th anniversary of the Second World War's end was commemorated in 2005. Perhaps because sixty years mark a full cycle in the Chinese horoscope there followed an unprecedented memory boom in Japan (Seaton 2007). War films had been made throughout the post-war period, so the topic was not new. Moreover, there was a clear continuation from what had been shown on screens previously: men sacrificing themselves for the sake of their loved ones, soldiers falling victim to the incompetence of their superiors, and civilians suffering indiscriminate bombing. I will not summarize these films here -- Desser (2016) already provides an excellent overview of the Japanese war film – but will focus on contemporary films as they would be most remembered by the audiences. While Gerow (2006, 2016) argues that some of these films have nationalistic undertones by uniting and reconciling the contemporary Japanese with their ancestors, I contend that several of them are open to multi-layered readings. For example, *Otokotachi no Yamato* (Pacific Battleship

Yamato,<sup>4</sup> Satō, 2005) appears to be patriotically portraying the selflessness of the soldiers who died on the Yamato, but it equally depicts the political and military authorities who insisted on sending soldiers to a futile death just because it seemed the noble thing to do.<sup>5</sup> The greater focus on the men below deck rather than those in command allows many contemporary Japanese viewers to empathize with the men who are forced to pointlessly die, while representing war as a senseless act. In this way, despite its patriotic fervor, the film also speaks to post-war discourses on Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution of 1947,<sup>6</sup> demonstrating why Article 9 is necessary.

The same can be said about films that deal with people who are nominally in charge of the decision-making processes. *Yamamoto Isoroku* (The Admiral, Narushima, 2011) a biopic about the admiral who masterminded and orchestrated the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, shows him as perennially on the search for peace. Yamamoto, unwilling to go to war in the first place, seeks to end it as soon as he possibly can. He is shown as a wise leader, reluctant to needlessly sacrifice men. While he emerges as exonerated due to his refusal to play by a rule book set by others in a war he does not want to fight, responsibility for Japan's calamity is subtly placed elsewhere, somewhere above him in the hierarchy.

Shifting accountability vaguely upward can also be observed in the cinematic remake of the television drama *Watashi wa kai ni naritai* (I want to be a shellfish, Fukuzawa, 2008).<sup>7</sup> It is always the others, never the hero, who are tainted by guilt and responsibility. The protagonist emerges innocent, a victim of unfavorable circumstances, and the blame gets shunted around. This makes it clear that the ordinary soldiers, and thus a majority of the Japanese, were innocent and the 'elites' are to blame, again subtly indicating Article 9's importance – as elites cannot be trusted to act in the people's best interest and therefore must be constrained. This is also true for *Eien no zero* (The Fighter Pilot, Yamazaki, 2013) in which the hero manages to defy all orders that would end in his death, unable to see the sense in a futile act of self-sacrifice. While the overtones are nationalistic, showing the supposed beauty and

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<sup>4</sup> The Yamato was the biggest battleship the Japanese Navy possessed. It sank in the battle of Okinawa in 1945. At the time, it was a source of pride and to this day, a museum in Kure (near Hiroshima) commemorates its building, action and loss.

<sup>5</sup> On this film see also Gerow 2005, 2016 and Dessler 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution contains a renouncement of the right to belligerency and a pledge never to maintain an Army.

<sup>7</sup> *Watashi wa kai ni naritai* was originally a television drama by the private station KRT (today's TBS) and it has been remade four times since. For a comparison between the various versions of the narrative, see Kirsch 2019.



versatility of the almost mythical Mitsubishi AM6 'Zero' fighter plane and the valor of its pilots, below the surface, the film interrogates military values. The protagonist insists on self-preservation in the face of conditions adverse to his survival. Showing no understanding of his subordinates and friends' death wish, accused as a traitor, the film again lays responsibility for the actions of the hero's friends and colleagues at the feet of the amorphous elites who create circumstances that force young men to die for no good reason.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout these films death and noble sacrifice are shown as inevitable, not because the heroes blindly follow orders to relinquish their lives for Japan, but first and foremost due to a complete failure of those in charge. Returning to the argument made in the previous section, although he is never mentioned directly, this would have included the Emperor. These films generally convey an anti-elitist feeling; it is the privileged who make people suffer needlessly, forcing them to fight a war that cannot be won, unable to end it without asking for a 'decisive battle'. To reiterate, this speaks more to the need for the constraints placed upon the post-war elites by Article 9 of the 1947 Constitution than it does to the engendering of a nostalgic feeling for the noble values of the war. Wartime Japan is not shown as a desirable place in which to live – while some of the ethics of the time (loyalty or bravery) may be glorified, the hardships experienced by people during the war (loss, hunger, bombing) eclipse them.

Linked to the trope of self-sacrifice in adverse conditions, another popular trope is that of survival. Living through the hardship, enduring in the face of difficulty (*gaman*) is shown as the more difficult, yet desirable, way to live, turning death into an overly simplistic solution. Nevertheless adversity is seen also as the impetus for the new, modern Japan to rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes. While some of the protagonists may have to die ensure the survival of future generations, others must survive to teach the post-war populace that war is bad and must not be repeated. The overwhelming message is one of 'hanging in there' with the promise of things eventually improving, if not for oneself, then at least for one's children, making sacrifice seem less futile. In short, militaristic Japan must die so post-war Japan can emerge. Additionally, most of the films try to forge a connection between generations (Gerow 2016), often through flashbacks (frequently used in *Otokotachi no Yamato* and *Eien no zero*), which demonstrate that Japanese society is better because of the suffering during the Second World War.

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<sup>8</sup> To some extent, these tropes also apply to television drama. Dramas dealing with soldiers will put survival in adverse conditions, with death not as a noble sacrifice but an inevitable necessity, a product of war, at the center.

Similar tropes emerge on contemporary television; most small screen dramas tend to focus on ordinary civilians during the war, not soldiers. Historically, soldiers did feature, as in the original version of *Watashi wa kai ni naritai* (TBS 1958). However, what that drama made evident was the fact that simple soldiers (and, again, the majority of the Japanese) were made to pay for their superiors' outrageously incompetent behavior. War era society is thus represented as being composed of victims and perpetrators, with the ordinary Japanese people, both civilians and simple soldiers, always depicted as victims.

What is equally common to both film and television drama, is the overall lack of context. Explanations for why Japan is at war in the first place are invariably missing from the plot. Although the usage of war era footage might appear to add a layer of 'authenticity' and credibility to the narratives of film and television dramas, no additional information is provided. Thus, the question of responsibility can be avoided more easily. In a nutshell, be it on the big or small screen, accountability lies always elsewhere, with the accusing finger pointing upward, vaguely in the direction of those in command, and -- for those audiences with background knowledge as well as somewhat leftist leanings -- ultimately at the Emperor. Yet Hirohito is never directly implicated; he is only evoked through the recording of his speech and thus is firmly linked to the surrender that brought peace.

### *Japan in August 2015 – Politics and Protest*

The atmosphere in Japan was heated in the summer of 2015. Abe Shinzō was in the process of pushing through his law on collective self-defense (*shūdanteki jieiken*), which would permit Japan to defend not just its own territory in case of an attack, but also to help its allies defend themselves if they are attacked. This law was widely seen as a backdoor to permitting Japan to wage war again, thereby undermining Article 9. These attempts were met with the longest and most decisive student protests (Slater et al. 2015.) since the days of the movement against the renewal of the Japan-US Security Treaty in 1960.

It was well known that Prime Minister Abe was part of the *Nippon kaigi*, a right-wing organization in favor of a 'less masochistic' view of Japanese history, one that left out the more controversial events, and changed the narrative about the war into a story of self-defense rather than one of aggression (Saaler 2016). Consequently Abe's statement on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war was anxiously awaited. With former prime minister



Murayama's 1995 statement serving as the benchmark for his successors to surpass, Abe did not disappoint those who had expected the worst. Instead of talking about Japan's responsibility, Abe spoke of the Western threat to East Asia and how Japan had just emulated what previous imperial powers had done. Suffering had happened everywhere, including Japan, but Japan's responsibility for that violence was barely mentioned; while the idea that future generations should not bear responsibility for Japan's past actions was affirmed. On 15 August, Emperor Akihito repeated his usual statement, which spoke of remorse, putting the Emperor's public view in stark contrast with that of his Prime Minister.<sup>9</sup>

All this took place against the background of the annual turmoil over honoring the war dead at Yasukuni Shrine. On August 15, 2015 there were people paying respect to their ancestors next to the usual array of ultranationalists. Some of these latter were dressed in Imperial Japanese uniforms and stood alongside a man in a German uniform, who held up a sign declaring that 'our grandfathers were no murderers but heroes'. Lining Yasukuni Avenue were posters denouncing both the Holocaust and the Nanjing Massacre.<sup>10</sup> During this somewhat strange and emotionally laden summer, anything seemed to go.

As television had also drawn disapproval from Abe for being too critical (Kirsch 2016, Fackler 2016), the allegedly left-wing stations TBS and TV Asahi produced two television dramas set in Manchuria, which were deeply steeped in colonial nostalgia (Kirsch 2018), seemingly playing it safe. On the big screen, only a handful of fiction films were released, two of which were remakes. One of them, *Nobi* (Fires on the Plain, Tsukamoto) told the story of a Japanese soldier lost in the Philippines, in the spirit of Ichikawa's original 1959 film *Nobi* (Fires on the Plain). Another film, *Kono kuni no sora* (The sky above our country, Arai) was a somewhat soppy love story between an adult man and an underaged teenage girl, set against the backdrop of the war, as if to warn that war erodes morality. Perhaps 2015 was the only year in which the *Emperor in August* could have been made and released, given the particular circumstances of this torrid August, and the fact that the film speaks to the present as well as to the past (Tsukada 2015a: 21), while reiterating the message that war is bad.

### *A Wise Ruler – Hirohito in The Emperor in August*

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<sup>9</sup> For both speeches see The Prime Minister and His Cabinet, 2015 and The Imperial Household Agency 2015.

<sup>10</sup> This description is based on personal experience during fieldwork in summer 2015 in Greater Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

*Nihon no ichiban nagai hi – The Emperor in August* saw a reprise of the dream combo of actor Yakusho Kōji and director Harada Masato. These two have regularly worked together since Harada's film *Kamikaze Taxi* (1995) and had joined forces again for *Sekigahara* (2017). In *The Emperor in August*, their fourth film together, Yakusho plays General Anami Korechika who was the War Minister in 1945. His is not the only well-known face, the cast is star-studded, with Yamazaki Tsutomu as the ageing Prime Minister Suzuki Kantarō and Motoki Masahiro as the Shōwa Tennō. In an interview with Tsukada Izumi (2015: 22), Motoki admits to having been worried about playing an actual historical figure, saying that he "wanted to escape from the role, but at the same time did not want the role to escape from him." With Harada's reassurance that he did not have to imitate the real Shōwa Tennō and could, instead play him as "Motoki Tennō" (Tsukada 2015: 24), he was reassured and ultimately rewarded with the 2015 Kinema Junpō Award for best supporting actor (Kinema Junpō 2015).

Harada, Yakusho and Motoki label the film a 'family drama' (Tsukada 2015a, b, Todoroki 2015), as the focus of the plot is on the relationship between General Anami, Prime Minister Suzuki and Emperor Hirohito, and their joint responsibility for ending the war. Although the Japanese title, *Nihon no ichiban nagai hi* – Japan's longest day – refers to the day before the *gyokuon hōsō* and the attempts to prevent the broadcast, the English subtitle, *The Emperor in August*, indicates that the Emperor plays an important part and is not just reduced to being the voice that ends the war. It is also clear from the outset that the plot focuses on those elites on whom one could, in line with previous films, assign responsibility for starting, fighting and ultimately ending the war. It is impossible for the film's main characters to deflect responsibility upwards, they already are at the top, which makes this film stand out in comparison with other war films.

Set in the last months of the war, the story begins on April 1945, with the forced resignation of Prime Minister Tōjō and Suzuki's appointment as his replacement. The film thus toys with historical fact – as Tōjō resigned in 1944 and was succeeded by Koiso Kuniaki, before Suzuki. It progresses, with various jumps in time, through to the day of the *gyokuon hōsō* on August 15, 1945. From the beginning it becomes clear that Harada's Emperor Hirohito is neither indecisive or uninvolved, nor is he a puppet. The choice of Suzuki as Tōjō's successor is his explicit wish and he even takes it upon himself to convince Suzuki, above

the heads of the Army who object to someone that they perceive to be an 'old Navy man'.<sup>11</sup> Also at the Emperor's request, because he trusts him, Army General Anami joins the cabinet. The three men are inextricably linked through past experiences, and, indeed, appear a somewhat like a 'family' due to their close relationship. At the point of Suzuki assuming office, official policy still dictated a truce with the USA only after a decisive battle (*hondo kessen*) is fought at home. However, while the cabinet members squabble about the shape of such a decisive battle, Suzuki and his aides are shown as deeply critical of the idea, as it would cost too many civilian lives. Then, at long last, the Emperor intervenes. During a meeting with the core of the war cabinet, the Emperor explicitly asks those present (including Suzuki and Anami) to negotiate peace. Wishing to end the Japanese people's suffering, he can take it no longer – trusting that none of those present will go against his wishes.

Negotiating peace without triggering a coup d'état straightaway requires skillful maneuvering and Anami becomes instrumental in this. He secretly plays a double game with the Cabinet and the Army. That peace is not easy to attain is made clear by jumps in time, Hirohito asks for peace in May, yet by July not much has happened, mainly because efforts for negotiating peace through the Soviet Union prove fruitless. Only the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at long last break the cabinet's deadlock. Although initially it looks as if Anami is against peace, he is merely stalling the Army in order to prevent a coup d'état which he knows about but does not condone. While the Cabinet had agreed to act upon the explicit wish of the Emperor, the Potsdam Declaration (issued on 26 July 1945) demands unconditional surrender. Given this stipulation, the ultimate aim becomes protecting both the national polity and the Emperor.

Although the Emperor had made his wishes clear to his Cabinet, he had refrained from interfering – however as the deadlock cannot be broken, Suzuki has no choice but to approach the Emperor for help. Unsurprisingly and in line with his previous expressive wish for peace, Hirohito replies: "If I could end the war that was started in my name with my heartfelt words, I would gladly do so" (*Watakushi no na ni yotte hajimerareta sensō wo watakushi no honshin kara no kotoba de shūshū dekiru nara arigataku omou*, 38:35). Through that sentence, it becomes clear that he is willing to do anything to end the war – he also subtly acknowledges at least some involvement in it, given that the war has been waged his name. This statement, set aside the knowledge that no one could have gone against his

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<sup>11</sup> Suzuki Kantarō indeed held the rank of an Admiral in the Navy.

wishes, also implies that he could have stood up much sooner, at least in ending the war. Thus, the decision to sue for peace and accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration becomes his; as supreme commander of the armed forces, the Emperor can order his soldiers to lay down their arms, and so the consultations over the wording of the *gyokuon hōsō* begin.

In a parallel plotline, lower and middle-ranking officers, led by Major Hatanaka, hear about the plans to end the war without the decisive battle that could destroy all of Japan. Disillusioned by losing everything in which they had believed and not getting what they were hoping for (a final battle), they are planning a rebellion and attempt to prevent the speech's broadcast by occupying the Imperial Palace and the station, NHK. Yet they need Anami on their side, who, through his double-dealings has given the impression of being against peace and in favor of a coup. Anami manages to stall their efforts, and with his suicide it becomes clear that their putsch is doomed. The film ends with their suicide and Hirohito reading out the *gyokuon hōsō*.

Here, it becomes important to briefly examine Okamoto Kihachi's 1967 version of *Nihon no ichiban nagai hi* and the non-fiction book by Handō Kazutoshi on which both films are based. In Okamoto's film, the Emperor is all but invisible, seen only from behind or at a distance. In Handō's book, the Emperor is much more present, so, in a way the 2015 film presents a return to the original non-fiction material, which, according to Harada, was also Handō's recommendation to him.<sup>12</sup> Okamoto's Emperor is distant and uninvolved, thereby not implicated. Motoki Masahiro, by contrast, manages to portray Hirohito with compassion and offers scope for audiences to identify with his position. He appears as a human being, not the divine figure he represents as per the national ideology at that time. Okamoto's Emperor is much more a divine distant being than Harada's and Motoki's. As a result, Hirohito also does not appear as the sole peace maker, leaving the field much more to Suzuki – while Anami ends up stalling the efforts. Showing the Emperor as distant, may be indicative of the time Okamoto's film was produced. If it had raised question of to what extent the Emperor was also responsible for starting the war, it would have done so at a time when he was still alive and in office.

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<sup>12</sup> Personal correspondence with Harada, 11 June 2019.

Looking beyond the confines of Japanese film, in 2005, the Russian film *The Sun* by Sokurov also dealt with Hirohito. Harada describes Sokurov's film as full of "silly mimicry",<sup>13</sup> as the Emperor in *The Sun* seems nervous, slightly deranged and completely detached from reality. The film makes Hirohito appear as mentally incapable of seeing what was going on around him, thereby permitting the conclusion that he should not stand trial after the war, as he would have been unfit for it. In opposition, Harada's Emperor does acknowledge some responsibility.<sup>14</sup> The film also implies that Hirohito did not need to stand trial, like Suzuki (who also did not stand trial), given that he was ultimately responsible for bringing peace. He is portrayed as a caring, wise ruler who puts the interests of his people above his own and, eventually, wins the peace. *The Emperor in August*, the 1967 version of *Nihon no ichiban nagai hi* and *The Sun* thus represent opposing interpretations of the same historical person.

*The Emperor in August* allows its audiences to look at the story behind the ever-present voice. The famous phrase, 'to bear the unbearable and suffer the insufferable', has long been enshrined as a myth, very much in Barthes's (2009) sense, a story that everyone can relate to and that has become part of the cultural fabric of Japanese war memories. As media texts are always open to various readings (Hall 2009, Fiske 1986), this film is also open to different readings that can speak to different audiences. On the one hand, Hirohito's willingness to make decisions where his Cabinet failed subtly places some responsibility on his shoulders – he could not have explicitly asked for peace or made his decision to accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration without some political clout. Additionally, the negotiations around the wording of the *gyokuon hōsō* make clear that what was broadcast was the lowest common denominator, at one point leading to the Cabinet Secretary exclaiming in frustration that it would exonerate future generations from taking responsibility for the mistakes of the wartime generation, a clear criticism against some right-wing politicians in present-day Japan. On the other hand, for the more conservative audience members, Hirohito makes the right decisions at the right time and acts as a wise, active, ruler should act, namely in the best interest of his subjects. The film allows also him to be more than a symbol. He remains the peace-bringer, the person who reads out the *gyokuon hōsō*, cementing the prevalent representation of him as the voice who ends it all as shown in other films.

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<sup>13</sup> Personal correspondence with Harada, 11 June 2019.

<sup>14</sup> In my interview with Harada, he remarks that some scenes that hint at Hirohito's overall displeasure about the war fell victim to cuts. Personal correspondence, 15 June 2019.

In short, the polysemic nature of the film makes it possible to watch it from both sides of the political spectrum in Japan – conservative and progressive, allowing both sides equal access to the story. The progressives can see an active monarch and even read a sense of responsibility and criticism of present-day war memory into it – while the conservatives might see the same responsibility but can read it as a sign of wisdom and the ‘born to rule’ right of royalty. Who would have thought that the role of the Emperor, so controversial throughout the post-war history, could become another common denominator?

### *Conclusion*

The presence of the Shōwa Tennō in *The Emperor in August* marks a clear break with canonical representations of the war – by showing those in charge of the decision-making process, the question of war responsibility is invariably raised. At the same time, the film gives a face to the voice that is so widely remembered. It also preserves the sentiment that the *gyokuon hōsō* is part and parcel of Japan’s post-war cultural trauma. After all, it is at the heart of the story and the film ends with the very speech that is so often heard in Japanese films set during the Second World War. However, because audiences are invited to share the characters’ feelings and responsibilities, viewers also will be inclined to see them as human beings who are fallible and have not always taken the best decisions, with war being the greatest failure of their humanity. In that sense, the film succeeds in going beyond the tropes employed in other war films which reduce the characters to superficial archetypes. While other Japanese war films may not have influenced Harada or this film,<sup>15</sup> audiences will have almost invariably have seen other Second World War films and thus make connections between them all. Through its approach of humanizing those in positions of responsibility, the film goes beyond the usual tropes of innocent civilians and simple soldiers at the mercy of their superiors. In *The Emperor in August*, there are no victims.

At the same time, the film fills a void in the collective memory of the war – while the trauma of defeat is closely associated with the *gyokuon hōsō*, how this landmark broadcast came to be made is a story that has never been fully told – and even the 1967 film does not really do that, instead, it focuses on the squabbles among the protagonists. Yet each of the films well reflects the times in which they were made – in 1967 Handō’s book had been published only

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<sup>15</sup> Personal correspondence with Harada Masato, 11 June 2019.



a few years previously, Hirohito was still alive and showing him on screen might have been more difficult – as this would have necessitated tackling the question of responsibility. In 2015, seventy years after the end of the war and twenty-six years after Hirohito's death, putting him at the story's center may have seemed to be a safe option, given that the controversy around the Imperial family had long since subsided.

What this film makes evident is that memories about the war remain contested in Japan and that it might still be difficult to find common ground between both sides historical memory. *The Emperor in August* could be seen as a response to the fact that in 2015 Abe and the *Nippon kaigi* were (and continue to be) in charge of the educational policies shaping the knowledge of future generations, it goes against their discourse of collective self-defense and does not glorify war. Against this political climate, Hirohito's responsibility both for ending the calamity and for the broadcast calling for surrender have emerged as a safe topic for filmmakers to tackle. The film -- despite the critique that it deals solely with the end of the war, not the beginning (Todoroki 2015) -- does push the boundaries of what is 'acceptable' to show while being very careful about it. Tackling the leaders to whom all other war films ultimately point also might have been a brave decision to take in the politically charged summer of 2015. By taking audiences back to the equally hot summer of 1945, it shows how responsibilities must be, and are, eventually shouldered.

Contextually, Hirohito's role as peace-bringer, not that of warmonger, illustrates the necessity of making decisions that are in the interest of the people, even if they are against the wishes of others in positions of power. Although the question of war responsibility is not explicitly raised, for the characters in *The Emperor in August* it is impossible to deflect responsibility upwards. If anything, it is reflected downwards to those soldiers who intend to continue fighting, who would rather drag all of Japan down with them in a decisive battle. In the end, it is no one's fault just as much as it is everyone's fault.

In many ways *The Emperor in August* conveys the message that wartime Japan was delusional, inflamed by an ideology that would have led to its complete downfall, had it not been for Hirohito's deus-ex-machina interference at the point when it is almost too late. This version of events goes against the works by Bix (2001) and Dower (1999) that made the Emperor much more accountable for starting it. In this sense, the film is very novel in its approach – looking at those at the highest levels of power has so far never been attempted as it would (and does) invariably lead to the question of who bears responsibility for the Pacific War. To which the answer is: not solely the Emperor but also most of the nation.

To return to the question that *Kinema Junpō* raised, ‘*eiga de nani ga dekiru no ka*’ – what can be done in a film? -- Harada gives the following answer:

“This is an anti-war film,” Harada says bluntly. “Its message is that only because we lost the army could we save the country. ... Some right-wing politicians or young people might look at Maj. Hatanaka and others and say they’re *kakkoii* (cool), but this movie is a double-edged sword,” he says, meaning that none of its main characters are purely good or evil. “I was fair to the Maj. Hatanaka character even though I don’t agree with him. I can’t deny that some might take advantage of that approach ... but people will take the film whichever way they want.”

(Schilling, *Japan Times*, 08/5/2015).

So, what can be done in film? The answer is both a lot and not much. Compared with the rather tame *Kono kuni no sora* of the same year or previous war films, *The Emperor in August* is almost revolutionary, because it shows those in charge of wartime Japan as fallible humans. The answer to that question also depends on a willingness to take risks on the side of the creatives, particularly given Japanese war memory controversies, which might force them to look for safe topics or themes to avoid a backlash. Like all mass media, film is multi-layered, offering oppositional readings as well as the auteur’s desired ones; this point is particularly pertinent for *The Emperor in August* as it speaks to both sides of Japan’s current political spectrum.

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